MAGELLAN IN REVERSE
(THE STORY OF THE *GLOBAL MARINER*)

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The *Global Mariner* has been the partial subject of several previous works: including the book and exhibition project *TITANIC's wake* (2003, English, French, German and Portuguese editions) and the outdoor photographic installation *Shipwreck and Workers* (Documenta 12, Kassel, 2007).

My hope and plan is to dedicate an exhibition sponsored by MuKHA in Antwerp, followed by a expanded project for the 2010 Sao Paulo Biennale to the detailed narrative and analysis of the ship's remarkable voyage of circumnavigation in 1998-2000. There is more to be said, especially now.

This voyage was a high point in the struggle against corporate globalization, cut short by the "war on terror" that ensued after September 11, 2001. We have just passed the 10th anniversary of the anti-globalization movement. The militant critique of neoliberalism has struggled on under the burden of globalized suspicion of all dissent, of politicians who are both clowns and fear-mongering gangsters. And now "anti-globalizers" face a new antagonist: finance capital run amuck.

In what sense is the "real economy" of the sea an antidote to the myth of limitless wealth accumulated through financial manipulation? We know that the idea of risk begins with the hazards of the sea. Is Jorge de Lima's "cup of sea" half full or half empty? And if it is full for some, is it empty for others, quite independently of optimism or pessimism? Does an "enormous hand" guide the ship, as Lima suggests in another of his poems? Are maritime metaphors a form of folly, both in economics and aesthetics?

The exhibition will consist of photographs mounted on the wall, text, graphics, drawings, reproductions from notebook pages, outdoor exhibition prints, slide projections and videos. If possible, I would like to meet the dockworkers in Salvador and Sao Paulo who enthusiastically welcomed the *Global Mariner* when it visited Brazil in 1998.

A selection of photographs from the project are attached.

An alternate title for the project is "Ship of Fools."

Addendum:

The following is from Allan Sekula, *TITANIC's wake* (Cherbourg: Le Point du Jour Éditeur, 2003). First published as part of "Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs," *October* 102 (Fall 2002), pp. 3-34.

Part 5: Anti-Titanic

Titanic, Waterworld, and *The Perfect Storm* tell an old story: men sacrifice themselves at sea so that women can nurture civilized values, or even revive civilization itself. The instincts, which are assigned no gender by psychoanalytic theory, are subordinated in these films to the traditional sexual division of labor. (This traditionalism cuts deeper than the superficial feminism found in *Titanic* and *Perfect Storm,* which allows bourgeois women to seek love freely and to be outspoken and prophetic patrons of the avant-garde and permits working class women to be fishing boat skippers.) These melodramas pretend that the "male" death instinct serves the "female" life instinct, as if in optimistic rejoinder to Freud's pessimistic conclusion to *Civilization and Its Discontents*. It goes almost without saying that this traditional view, which can never be honest about the fact that its "morality" instrumentalizes the instinctual level of the psyche, has served as one of the principle ideological justifications for war, for organized aggression on a grand scale. Consider the motley crew of "smokers" in *Waterworld,* ensconced as postapocalyptic galley-slaves and pirates aboard the rotting hulk of the

Exxon Valdez under the command of a maniacal Dennis Hopper. On the one hand, we can be sure that this is an intentionally self-parodic projection onto the *lumpen-proletariat* of the petroleum-consumption patterns of your average successful SUV-driving Hollywood screenwriter. But the smokers also epitomize the bad habits that qualify a society for *rogue nation* status, for elevation to the target-list for the next barrage of cruise missiles. In the film the "bad" death instinct of the smokers can only be thwarted (or, more precisely, gratified) by the "good" death instinct of the *thalassally-regressed* mutant fishman Kevin Kostner, who is by virtue of his enhanced swimming ability a kind of human torpedo. It would be absurd for me to say that these are "militarist" films, but their therapeutic and homeostatic approach to the problem of human destructive energies puts them in line with the new rhetoric of state violence, which is always violence exercised in the interest of abstract human rights, or, more concretely, *for the future of the children.*

Not long ago I was able to see the recently-restored traveling-exhibition version of *The Family of Man* at its permanent home, the Château de Clervaux in Luxembourg, near the site of the Battle of the Ardennes. An old US Army Sherman tank, presumably a relic of that battle, welcomes the visitor at the entrance to the castle. What was most striking about the meticulous reconstruction undertaken by Steichen's natal country is that now one can see how modest and slow-paced the spectacle-culture of the 1950s was by contrast with the Hollywood blockbusters, mega-exhibitions and digital image-streams of today. By current standards, the scale of the photographs is far from superhuman, and I saw a group of German high school students slipping into a kind of solemn, attentive reverie as they moved patiently among the monochromatic panels, as if this were very different from their experience of going to the movies, playing a computer game, or clicking on a web link. Perhaps this is the ultimate museological destiny of *The Family of Man:* to become the immobilized relic of a global road show that provided the model for the travelling museum blockbusters of today. Does the very *obsolescence* of *The Family of Man* open up a plethora of possibilities?

Just for a moment, imagine that the restored *Family of Man* had been installed instead aboard a ship, and that the ship sailed around the world, visiting all the port cities that had originally taken the exhibition, from New York to Cape Town to Jakarta, and maybe a few others that weren't on the original itinerary. In some cities, a rich menu of competing cultural choices combined with general urban indifference to the waterfront would bring few visitors: maybe no more than fifty people in New York, despite the free admission. In others cities, maybe in Karachi, the ship would be so swamped with visitors that it would almost heel over and capsize at the dock: an audience of thirty thousand in one day. In the richer countries, caps and T-shirts would be sold; in poor countries these would be give way to free souvenirs. It would be a simple no-frills cargo ship, so there would be none of the connotations of protected luxury that accrue to a château or to the cruise vessel commandeered in Genoa by the frightened leaders of the rich nations. In many cities, dissident and human-rights groups would be invited to convene public forums in a conference room built into one of the holds. These same groups would provide hospitality for the crew. A web site would track the vessel's progress. The ship would fly the flag of landlocked Luxembourg, or maybe that of the United Nations, or perhaps an unrecognizable flag, unrelated to any known sovereign entity, perhaps bearing a portrait of Steichen's mother holding a freshly baked apple pie. It would not fly the flag of the United States, nor would it display the ensign of the Museum of Modern Art, and there would be no Sherman tank lashed to the hatch covers.

This would be the ghost ship imagined by the *New* York Times: *the aging cargo ship in the age of e-mail*. What I am describing here, taking only modest license, is the 1998-2000 circumnavigation of the Global *Mariner, an* 18,000 deadweight-ton general cargo vessel carrying in its converted holds a remarkable exhibition about working conditions at sea, and-in a broader sense-about the hidden social costs and probable consequences of corporate globalization. Sponsored by the International Transport Workers Federation, a London-based umbrella organization of over 450 transport-workers' unions around the world, the ship was actually the brainchild of a group of German and British seafarer-activists who also happened to be disaffected veterans of Greenpeace, interested in the problem of an international linkage of labor and environmental struggles. Their primary concern was the system of *flag of convenience* shipping, a lawerly ruse invented by American shippers in the mid- 1 940s that allows wealthy ship owners to register their vessels in poor nations offering what is often termed *paper sovereignty: a flag for a fee.* The system is rife with abuses, and indeed its very purpose is abuse: shielding exploitative labor conditions and substandard vessels behind a bewildering legal maze. The ITF has been waging a campaign against this system for fifty years, trying to enforce minimum standards of pay and safety for seafarers.

The solution of the ITF activists was to connect this venerable and not always very successful fight to the broader campaign against corporate globalization. Here it is worth noting that since 1995 key working-class resistances to neoliberal policies-reduced social security, casualization of work in the name of "flexibility," union-busting, and privatization of public infrastructure-have come from workers in the transport sector: railway workers in France, dockers in Australia, Chile and Brazil, bus drivers and airline crews in Mexico, delivery drivers in the United States. These battles against the doctrine of the untrammeled market predate Seattle.

The *Global Mariner was* a floating version of the agit-train, reconceived in the context of an eclectic and decidedly post-Bolshevik left-wing politics. (The ITF had its origins in solidarity actions linking Dutch and British dockers and seafarers at the end of the nineteenth century, and remained close to the traditions of the old socialist Second International for much of its history.) The quixotic *agit-ship* was nonetheless indebted to the experiments of radical productivist art in the young Soviet Union, and also to the photomontages of John Heartfield and the workers' theatre of Erwin Piscator. Remember that Steichen had already borrowed from the big-scale presentational techniques of Russian designers and photographers of the 1920s for his thematic photo exhibitions of the 1940s and fifties: there are ghostly shadows of El Lissitsky and Rodchenko in The Family of *Man*. Having witnessed the absorption of these once-radical devices into the toolkit of corporate liberalism and advertising, one could say that now the *Global Mariner* has reappropriated this tradition to forge a new-old weapon against the neoliberalism of the twenty-first century.

But before the exhibition, with its big computer-generated photomurals and its eerie post-Stockhausen soundtrack, there is the fact of the *ship and the voyage* in and of themselves, readymade-like in the subtlety of their ambiguous status as already existing but transformed object and context.

The *Lady Rebecca* (as "she" had been christened two decades before on the North Sea coast of Britain) had gone through five names, a series of superimposed reinscriptions of bow and stern, each prior name an increasingly obscure trace beneath the bright white paint announcing the new identity. The calculated amnesia of the world of international shipping offers a lesson to those who celebrate the postmodern flux of identity. One of the stranger stories of this common practice: in mid-passage a captain receives a telex noting that the ship has been sold and must be renamed. The captain politely asks the new name and is told to send a crewman over the side-risky business when underway-to paint out every other letter of the old name. What would Mallarmé make of this? The concrete poetry of the contemporary maritime world, the nominative magic worked out between the telex machine and the paint locker: here we return to Melville's *Benito Cereno,* but confront not the ambiguities of insurrection and mutiny but a mastery that disguises itself. Whose ship? Which ship? A palimpsest of disguises and deceits, a deliberate muddying of the waters.

Nearing the end of its/her working life, the ship formerly known as the *Lady Rebecca* entered a state of dangerous decrepitude, owned by a Hong Kong shipping company, flagged, I believe, to Panama, crewed by Filipinos, and finally--at the literal end of her ropes--moored at offshore anchorage in the bustling port of Pusan, on the southeast coast of Korea, waiting. For what? A shady buyer willing to squeeze out the last bit of profit from the laborious and plodding and dangerous journeys of an aging vessel, a *death ship* in the making. Or, the owner makes the final blunt decision, almost that of a farmer in its frank brutality, though less intimate than one based on veterinary observation, since this is a decision made at a distance--in Hong Kong or London or Zurich--without poking at the rust breeding on the ladders and the hatch coaming, or poking at the cracks in the hull, or reading the engine room log with its depressing catalog of failing valves and pumps. From the pasture of the anchorage, the ship embarks on the long voyage to the rendering plant. Send "her" to the gently-sloping beaches of India, to be run ashore at high tide by a skeleton crew: engines full ahead onto the oily sand, to be broken by the sledges and cutting torches of vast crews of gaunt laborers, the *abattoir* of the maritime world, the ship re-manned for the last time by the last toiling victims in the cycle of oceanic exploitation.

Then miraculously--although here other metaphors, those of rescue and redemption, are also to be used as if this were fiction--the ship was purchased by the International Transport Workers Federation in the summer of 1998, reflagged to Britain and arduously refitted at the Mipo dockyards of Hyundai, just north of Pusan, and then sailed by a Croatian crew to the German port of Bremerhaven, where it was further fitted-out with the exhibition, and then, only a few months after the initial purchase-all this was done at breakneck pace-it embarked with a new

name on a twenty-month circumnavigation, setting out to visit 83 cities around the world. The crew was a polygot mix: English, German,Icelandic, Filipino, Burmese, Scottish, Croatian, New Zealander, Ukrainian, Russian, Japanese, Dutch, Irish.

Depending on the political situation of the local unions who invited the ship, the visits could be militant and combative. For example, the crew joined the dockers of Valparaiso in their fight against Chilean government plans for port privatization, demonstrated alongside exiled Burmese seafarers and other democracy campaigners outside the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok, and staged a protest in support of striking American shipyard workers in New Orleans.

Two fast launches were stowed on top of the rear hatch cover, and these allowed for rapid, Greenpeace-style actions. In other instances, the ship was isolated from public contact by unsympathetic governments, as happened in Hong Kong, a city whose crypto-"market-Stalinist" chief executive happens to be the former head of an international container-shipping line. A invitation to Greece scheduled for the very last day of the millennium was rescinded at the eleventh hour by a seafarers' union unwilling to challenge powerful Greek shipowners. Faraway political events could change the tenor of the ship's reception, as happened in Istanbul a few weeks after the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization. For the first time, the ship was greeted at the dock by workers bearing banners specifically denouncing globalization. And indeed the ship's visit to Seattle in the spring of 1999 had been one of a number of local events leading up to the November protests.[1]

If, as Michel Foucault has suggested, ships are the very exemplar of heterotopias (real spaces that call other spaces into question), the *Global Mariner* was the heterotopia of heterotopias. Or if you want, this was a *meta-ship,* representing and figuring within itself, within the exhibition that was its only cargo, all the other invisible, ignored and silent ships of the world. The *Global Mariner* had to be real ship functioning in an exemplary way, to be the Good Ship that social justice demanded other ships should and could be, but it was also an *empty vessel* carrying nothing but ballast and a message. This "emptiness" may have provoked the hostile captain of one substandard vessel targeted by the ITF to refer to the Global Mariner as a “toy ship” as if it had been de-realized by the absence of heavy cargo. And yet this was a vessel of old-fashioned self-sufficiency, equipped with onboard cranes that allowed it to load and discharge cargo at terminals without dockside equipment, the sort of vessel commonly seen trading in more remote third world ports. The *Global Mariner* functioned in marked contrast to the specialized container and bulk ships of today's shipping world, which only work by being integrated into a larger machine ensemble of dockside cranes and conveyors. Its functional autonomy and versatility allowed the *Global Mariner* to become a large mobile art space that could efficiently install, transport, and display its exhibition.

The *Global Mariner* was also embarked on what can only be seen as an ironic, counter-enactment of an older project dating back to the very origins of modem imperial dominion, namely the first circumnavigation of the globe by Magellan. This was *Magellan in reverse.* Indeed, the ritual significance of circumnavigation cannot be under-emphasized. These epochal voyages were first re-enacted in the epoch of high imperialism, serving as theatrical assertions of a naval power's emergence on the world stage, as was the case with the circumnavigation of Admiral Dewey's "White Fleet" after the decisive American victory over Spain in Manila Bay in 1898. In the American case, the grand, global naval parade, *showing the hag,* in naval parlance, put the muscle behind the geo-strategic ambition expressed by the naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan.

In the later twentieth century, the solo circumnavigator ritually revitalizes the individualist underpinnings of the capitalist spirit of adventure, while simultaneously obscuring-through the drama of solitary endeavor and extreme self-sufficiency--the industrial and social dimension of the world-spanning project. The fascination with such voyages, manifested in the tragically ill-fated work of Bas Jan Ader, or more recently in a number of intriguing projects by Tacita Dean, is entirely consistent with a return to a seemingly exhausted romanticism, and an effort to divorce adventure from its historical linkage with plunder and conquest. That romanticism should only seek its survival in oceanic immersion, hyper-solitude, and the extreme extra-territoriality of the middle passage is a sign of the desperation encountered in its rescue from generalized cultural debasement. Today this postmodern, quasi-romantic "return" to the sea must be understood as fundamentally different from its Byronic precedent, since it contends with a sea that is both depleted of resources and sublimely threatening in a new way with the

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advent of global warming, a sea that kills and is being killed, a sea that is also subject-in the developed world-to a ubiquitous variety of hyperreal representations, from aquatic theme parks to the species-rich aquariums that have become a fixture of every urban waterfront leisure complex.

The *Global Mariner* insisted, on the contrary, in its plodding *ordinary* way on the return to social questions. Speaking with the caution of a Cold War liberal, Steichen had claimed that *The Family of Man* was about "human consciousness, not social consciousness."" The great strength of the *Global Mariner* experiment was to raise the question of society from the very space that is imagined to be beyond society. Nothing special: a ship like many others, so ordinary that one Seattle resident, seeing the ship being ceremoniously welcomed by the fireboats of that strong union city, wondered what the fuss was all about. In other words, here was the sort of welcome one would expect for an aircraft carrier or the QE2, but not for an old *'tween decker, presumably carrying coffee or pulp paper, or some other anonymous bulk commodity.*

It is all the more profound that this ship should seek to represent the workings of empire at a time when the global economy is assumed to be entirely virtual in its connectedness, magically independent of the slow maritime movement of heavy things. The arrogant conceit of the cyber-economy, for that matter of the very idea of the *post-industrial* era, is that we disavow our dim but nagging awareness that nearly all energy-whether converted to electricity or derived from direct combustion-comes from oil or other hydrocarbon fossil fuels, or on fissionable uranium refined from yellow-cake ore: solids, liquids and gases that are extracted from the earth and transported in bulk. The very slowness of the *Global Mariner's* voyage, the twenty months of its circumnavigation, reminds us of the duration of early-modern seafaring under sail, and also of the contemporary persistence of slow, heavy transport flows.

This was the anti-*Titanic*. The Glaswegian quartermaster aboard the *Global Mariner,* a wiry veteran seafarer by the name of Jimmy McCauley, made the point very succinctly, referring to the steady aggregate loss of life at sea, crews of twenty at a time on bulk ore carriers that mysteriously break in half, sometimes in calm seas, or the myriad Filipino passengers crammed onto decrepit ferries that capsize or burn in the Sulu Sea: "A *Titanic happens every year, but no one hears about it."*

The exhibition itself brought this home with a narrative program that took the visitor from a happy and optimistic view of seafaring-a mix of shipping industry propaganda and tourist fantasy-to an increasingly dark and dismal view of calamities and dangers at sea, culminating in a meticulous model of the ill-fated Swedish ferry *Estonia* underwater in a fish-tank vitrine, this last amounted to a morbid seafarers' joke on the display techniques of maritime museums. As one descended from upper to lower holds, and moved forward toward the bow of the ship, the use of archival images-of injured seafarers and atrocious living conditions, of shipwrecks, fires and oil spills-became more and more insistent, until one climbed to the upper hold dedicated to public discussion and debate. Many of the photographs used were taken by the ITF's ship inspectors in ports around the world, who are themselves dockers and seafarers. This documentary imperative brings openness to an industry traditionally veiled in secrecy. In fact, the current tendency to extend forensic investigations to non-military shipwrecks, using deep submersibles when necessary, is largely traceable to precedents set by the ITF.

Miren del Olmo, chief mate aboard the *Global Mariner,* told me a story. A Basque from a poor fishing village on the outskirts of Bilbao, daughter of a retired shipyard worker, she recalled having crossed the Nervión river on her way to English class one Saturday in the late 1980s, preparing for the *lingua franca* of a life at sea. Hearing commotion in the distance, she glanced back at the bridge, just next to the soon-to-be-closed shipyard that would ten years later provide the site for Frank Gehry's Guggenheim. The roadway and pylons suddenly disappeared in a fog of tear gas.

Displaced welders and shipwrights--her father's comrades--were battling with the riot squads of the National Police. She told the story as she stood watch late one December night on another sort of bridge, as the *Global Mariner* made its way west across the Black Sea. It occurred to me that we were doubtless crossing the course taken almost a century earlier by the mutinous battleship *Potemkin,* as it zig-zagged from Odessa to Constanza seeking shelter from the Tsarist fleet.

The ship shuddered through heavy winter swells, seemingly going nowhere. After a long silence, broken only by the intermittent crackle of radio voices speaking the terse and variably accented English of the sea-lanes, Miren remarked that she had yet to spend enough time at home in Bilbao to be able to visit the new museum. But in her unprofessional opinion, speaking frankly to an American, it looked like it had been built from every can of Coke drunk in Bilbao."

As Melville's Bartelby, broken by the post office, put it to his boss: "I would prefer not to." On August 3, 2000, having completed its mission as a good ship, an exemplary ship, a ship representing all the other invisible ships of the world, the *Global Mariner,* bearing a cargo of steel coil, was rammed and sunk at the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, not far from the fictional refuge of Robinson Crusoe, a shipwrecked *isolato* from an earlier mercantile era. Thanks to Bill Gates and his minions, I received this news by e-mail, but not in writing. Instead, without warning, a startling picture rolled downward on the screen of my computer: a ship I knew well, sinking, photographed from a lifeboat by one of the crew.